

MAKING TRACKS

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Newsletter of the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Spring 2003

The Liberty Loop: Low Cost Key to Downtown Revival

By William K. Guild

In the wake of 9/11, numerous proposals have been put forward to restore and upgrade transportation facilities in Lower Manhattan destroyed in the terrorist attack. Largely overlooked among the more grandiose plans is the continuing need for a surface circulator, providing reliable local transit between the numerous stations, terminals, "hubs" and destinations within the irregular square mile district south of City Hall. The need for such a facility has grown throughout the City's history as Lower Manhattan has been extended into both rivers by successive landfills—first to the west from Trinity Place and Church Street to West Street, then east from Pearl Street to South Street and then west again, with the creation of Battery Park City. The original five block river-to-river walk at Fulton Street is now over a mile, from South Street Seaport to the World Financial Center ferry landing.

Earlier circulator proposals have included unsightly overhead "peplemovers," prohibitively expensive underground systems, and shuttle bus surface loops. A loop bus service was implemented with some success by New York Waterway prior to the 9/11 attack. A new free-fare version using electric buses powered by batteries is being advanced by the Alliance for Downtown NY Business Improvement District. Although this is a step in the right direction, bus service becomes unreliable in heavy traffic.

A different approach was put forward by the Committee for Better Transit in its May/June 1995 issue of *New York Streetcar News*: a continuous, double track light rail circulator operating in both directions over a roughly triangular route across Fulton Street on the north and reaching South Ferry at the southern tip of Manhattan.

The Original Liberty Loop

Dubbed the Liberty Loop, the downtown light rail circulator began as a proposed amenity to the then-new auto-free Fulton Promenade—the successful temporary lunchtime closing of Fulton Street from Gold Street to Broadway. The new light rail line would be located in the center of what would become a permanent pedestrian crosstown street, not unlike the Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition's proposal for Christopher St./8th Street/St. Marks Place. As with the Village trolley, the Fulton Street segment of the Lib-

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The PATH-Lex Connection: East Side Access to New Jersey

By George Haikalis

Rebuilding the World Trade Center offers an opportunity to connect the Downtown PATH line with the #6 Lexington Avenue local subway. Trains from Newark and Hoboken could then pass through Lower Manhattan and continue to Chinatown, SoHo, the East Village and East Midtown. PATH turnstiles would be converted for MTA MetroCard use and double fares would be eliminated.

Direct PATH train service from New Jersey would be a real stimulus for the sagging economy in Chinatown and the East Village.

It would also benefit residents. With the transfer of many jobs to the Jersey City waterfront, a direct train service would ease what has become a difficult commute for many displaced Lower Manhattan workers who live along the Lexington line. A second route from NJ to the Village would reduce the need to expand stairway capacity at the Christopher and 9th Street PATH stations, eliminating a major community disruption. The new link would make it easier for residents from Manhattan's East Side to reach a restored World Trade Center, requiring only a simple cross-platform transfer at Brooklyn Bridge for a short ride to the World Trade Center development. Port Authority and MTA plans call for complex passageways lined with shops, requiring long walks.

The PATH-Lex connection would be relatively easy to build, requiring some 3,000 feet of track construction and a new station under Fulton Street. The link would pass under the A and C lines and St. Pauls Chapel, and over the 2 and 3 line at Beekman Street, connecting directly into existing trackage at the Brooklyn Bridge Station. The connection would cost about \$600 million, but it would save over \$2 billion that the Port Authority

plans to spend for a Grand Central-like terminal to replace its soon to be opened temporary PATH station.

The entire PATH system would be transferred to the MTA and integrated into the far larger NYC Transit subway network, yielding substantial operating cost savings. The Port Authority would pay the MTA to run the service, while reducing its overall financial outlay. MTA would gain a much-needed modern car shop at Harrison, NJ for its IRT (numbered lines) fleet. Existing life-expired PATH cars

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—Courtesy Portland Streetcar
European-style low-floor LRV designed exclusively for urban transit is car of choice for new Portland Streetcar system. Longer, higher-capacity version of this 140-passenger, double articulated vehicle might be ideal for Liberty Loop.

On the Back: Letter from the Editor, Astor Place Festival

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erty Loop would follow the route of an earlier crosstown streetcar line which once ran from river to river. The initial plan for the Liberty Loop was to run from South Street Seaport, along Fulton Street to Church Street, where it would turn south and then west again along Liberty Street, into Battery Park City. It was to follow South End Avenue and Battery Place, skirting Battery Park with important stations at Pier A, Bowling Green and South Ferry, then complete its 3-mile circuit back to the Seaport along South Street, part of the way under the FDR Drive.

The line would serve the Whitehall terminal and each of the other ferry landings ringing lower Manhattan. It would provide direct connections to all rapid transit lines entering the area below Canal Street, PATH as well as fifteen NYCT subway lines and numerous bus routes. Apart from a lack of direct "one seat" rides for suburban rail commuters, who must transfer to subways (or ferries) at terminals in midtown, Brooklyn or New Jersey, Lower Manhattan is superbly served by public transit. Movement within the area, however, continues to be seriously constrained by congestion and the absence of a reliable surface circulator.

Residents, Commuters & Tourists

Since the Liberty Loop plan was first advanced, the residential component in Lower Manhattan has continued to increase, with conversions of former office and commercial structures supplementing the extensive new residential construction of recent years. Those living in Battery Park City and elsewhere along the periphery, remote from the infrastructure of the original "core," may find themselves isolated to a considerable degree. Even the canyons of Wall Street, which seem so near, are yet so far and difficult to reach. A convenient, fast and reliable surface circulator would provide access not only to the all-important subways and buses, but also to jobs, stores, cultural facilities and other destinations throughout the financial district itself.

Many commuters enter the area on those subways, heading for the World Financial Center and other new commercial sites along the edges. Conversely, many among the increasing numbers of

commuters arriving by ferry need transportation to the office towers and other commercial facilities in the older core area. A rail-based surface circulator is the only practical way of providing local transit for such large numbers of commuters during peak hours.

Large and growing throngs of tourists were descending upon Lower Manhattan well before 9/11 and they will continue to arrive long after Ground Zero has been rebuilt. The South Street Seaport and dozens of other historic, cultural and entertainment attractions are found throughout the downtown area. MTA's "Fun Pass" and other unlimited ride time-based fare media are already enormously popular with visitors and would guarantee a high and steady ridership for the Liberty Loop in this increasingly "mixed use" district.

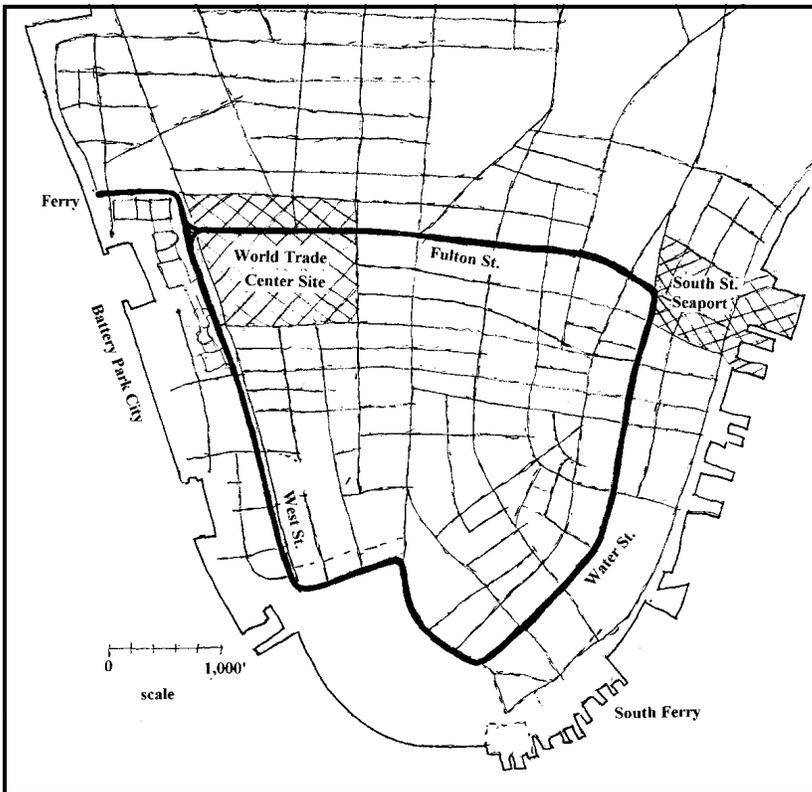
Reinventing the Liberty Loop

The destruction of the World Trade Center and the conflicting plans for rebuilding on the site have not diminished the need for a local downtown surface distributor. Even the Port Authority / MTA plans for passageways from the World Financial Center to Broadway would provide, at best, subterranean "moving sidewalks" connecting points along a 3,000 foot axis. A key feature of the WTC rebuilding proposal, recently selected by the Governor and the Mayor, is the restoration of Fulton and Greenwich Streets, and perhaps other streets, through the 16-acre "superblock," providing better access for pedestrians and, to a very limited extent, vehicles. Integration of the Liberty Loop into a restored street grid would greatly enhance accessibility of new buildings and other features within the site, while improving the overall efficiency and utility of transit throughout Lower Manhattan.

Using the Fulton Street crosstown streetcar route of a century ago, the Liberty Loop could follow the restored Fulton Street to and across West Street, turning South to run along the western margin of that thoroughfare to Battery Place, at the southern end of Battery Park City. A junction at the turn from Fulton Street would provide a spur through Vesey Street to North End Avenue in the World Financial Center, a few steps from the Battery Park City ferry terminal. Indeed, this would eliminate a weakness of the original Liberty Loop alignment, the long walk from the ferry terminal to a light rail station at Liberty Street and South End Avenue. Several service options are possible, depending on the volume of ferry passengers attracted. Trains would operate to and from this ferry terminal, in both directions around the Liberty Loop.

While the route as originally proposed would have run through the middle of Battery Park City, an alignment along the redeveloped West Street would put stations within two blocks of any residential building in the complex, while better serving the mixed use area west of Broadway. Similarly,

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Liberty Loop -- Light Rail Transit for Lower Manhattan

A 2.5-mile light rail local circulator would link key subway stations, ferry terminals and the Downtown PATH station with major travel generators like the South Street Seaport, Battery Park City and the restored World Trade Center. This would ease access and stimulate economic activity and tourism in Lower Manhattan. The Fulton Street segment of the loop would be in an auto-free street, including its extension across the World Trade Center site. The West Street alignment would be included in a redesigned boulevard. The Water Street segment could be in a reservation in the median of this street, or the entire street could be made auto-free. For a really successful rebuilding of downtown streets, public agencies should develop a comprehensive street management plan that includes consideration of the needs of motorists, pedestrians and surface transit users.

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moving the eastern leg inland from South Street to State and Water Streets would bring it closer to more destinations east of Broadway, while shortening the route overall. This alignment could also be integrated easily into a more extensive light rail system, such as MTA's Lower East Side line along Avenue D and 14th Street to Union Square, described in the April/May/June 1997 issue of *New York Streetcar News*, or the 2nd Avenue surface line described in the March/April 1996 of that newsletter.

Other things being equal, shortening the loop by moving it "inboard" from both rivers would reduce both capital and operating costs, since up to a half mile of double track "guideway" would be eliminated and the reduced circuit would require fewer vehicles to maintain any given level of service. In this revised proposal, however, these economies are offset by the Vesey Street spur, an improvement not just for users of the adjacent ferry landing, but also for many people working and living in the northern sections of the World Financial Center/Battery Park City complex.

LRVs as Streetcars

In the eight years since the Liberty Loop plan was first published, light rail technology has continued to develop as systems are built, expanded and improved, especially in North America. Low floor cars, once visionary and expensive, are now the LRVs of choice both for new systems, including the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail just across the river, and for expanding fleets, such as MAX in Portland (OR) where low floor cars now outnumber the original "conventional" vehicles. Low floor LRVs offer significant advantages, speeding operation by reducing dwell time and easing access for people with walking difficulties, parents with strollers and persons in wheelchairs.

The MAX light rail line, first opened in 1986, now includes a 33-mile east-west Blue line from Gresham to Hillsboro and a Red Line to Portland International Airport (PDX), with another northern branch under construction to the Columbia River and, eventually, Vancouver, WA. All routes operate to or through downtown Portland, linking business districts east and west of the Willamette River within a so-called "fareless" zone. While the in-town segments operate mainly in city streets, these are basically interurban lines operating at speeds up to 55 MPH over exclusive right of way in suburbia and beyond. The LRVs, both high floor and low, are large, fast and relatively expensive.

In July 2001, Portland became the first city in America to place into service a new generation of LRVs designed specifically for an urban streetcar operation (*Making Tracks*, Fall 2000). Except for a short segment on the Portland State University campus, Portland Streetcar operates entirely on city streets and thus a high

speed capability is irrelevant. The LRVs chosen are Czech-built Skoda cars, a type popular in Europe and elsewhere. Smaller and less expensive than the low-floor Siemens cars now used on MAX, these double-articulated "trams" are ideal for short urban routes with frequent stops and 30 MPH top speeds. Similar cars are available from several manufacturers. A vehicle of this general type should be adapted for the Liberty Loop and other purely urban routes, in New York and elsewhere across the country.

Fares and Fare Media

Fares on the Liberty Loop should be integrated into the general transit fare structure and, like all new light rail operations, should utilize a proof of payment system. This system makes use of random inspections, accompanied by stiff fines for violators and does work, however counter-intuitive, generally with lower evasion rates than farebox or turnstile operations. Proof-of-purchase permits the use of all doors, to enter as well as leave a vehicle, and has been a critical element in the success of light rail.

The current MetroCard may require some modification for a proof-of-purchase system to work efficiently, since the design deliberately conceals payment information. While inspectors could use hand-held validators to check MetroCards, this process would be slow and cumbersome. A more conventional visual inspection would require passengers to obtain printed receipts from trackside or on-board validators. MTA's advanced "smart card", now under development, opens the way for more rapid validation techniques allowing proof-of-purchase to be used on existing buses as well as light rail vehicles.

While downtown residents would no doubt welcome light rail to reach local destinations, most commuters would use the Liberty Loop to begin or complete longer transit journeys and thus not pay a separate fare. But by making such trips easier and more convenient, the Liberty Loop will draw more travelers to public transit and, most important for the recovery effort, make Lower Manhattan a much more attractive place to live, work and do business.

The Bottom Line

Surface light rail transit built in dense urban area, like NJ Transit's recently completed Hudson-Bergen LRT, can cost as much as \$50 million per mile including cars and shops. Portland's new streetcar line cost half that much per mile. Even with New York City's legendary inflated construction costs, this two and one half mile Liberty Loop proposal should cost less than \$200 million. Cost could be greatly reduced if the line were built as part of a NYC Department of Transportation program of federally funded roadway work in the area. This includes the complete reconstruction of Water and Fulton Streets between 2004 and 2007, and an engineering

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study for a similar rebuild of State Street beginning in 2003. With the details of a Champs Eliséés-style boulevard or other replacement for the existing West Street still to be determined, virtually the entire Liberty Loop alignment would be on streets scheduled for complete reconstruction over the next four years. By including rail and other infrastructure for the proposed circulator in these streets as they are rebuilt, the relatively modest cost of installing the "fixed guideway" would be reduced even further, while disruption and inconvenience to residents and businesses along the route, usually a great concern with light rail projects, would be all but eliminated.

While the cost of building and equipping a light rail circulator would be significant, this cost pales by comparison with other multi-billion dollar downtown transportation "improvements" now being proposed. The Liberty Loop should receive immediate and serious consideration as an integral part of the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site and the revitalization of Lower Manhattan in general. □

Dear Reader,

Much of the discussion about rebuilding transportation in Lower Manhattan after the terrorist attack of 9/11 has focused on the architectural elements of access between subway stations and a restored PATH terminal. Missing is consideration of increasing the amount and quality of pedestrian space and improving local surface transit. VCTC's plan for converting Christopher Street/Eighth Street/St. Marks Place into a crosstown pedestrian and light rail corridor provides an ideal model for Lower Manhattan. In this issue we describe how Fulton Street in Lower Manhattan could be developed as an auto-free light rail boulevard as part of a distributor loop for Downtown. We also summarize a proposal for bringing PATH to the East Village and East Midtown as part of rebuilding the Trade Center. Then our Village Crosstown Trolley would link with PATH at Astor Place as well as in the West Village.

Michael Goodman, *Editor*

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would be replaced by expanding the ongoing order for new subway cars producing economies of scale. Car dimensions are virtually identical. Finally, the new link would connect well with surface light rail proposals like the Liberty Loop (described in the accompanying article) at Fulton Street and the Village Crosstown Trolley line at Astor Place. The surface lines would enhance the connectivity and improve the walking environment for PATH-Lex passengers using these stations. □

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition
is proud to sponsor the

Astor Place Festival

Sunday, June 15, 2003, 11am to 6pm
Astor Place between Broadway and Lafayette St. in
Greenwich Village, NYC

Please stop by our booth to learn more about our proposal.

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

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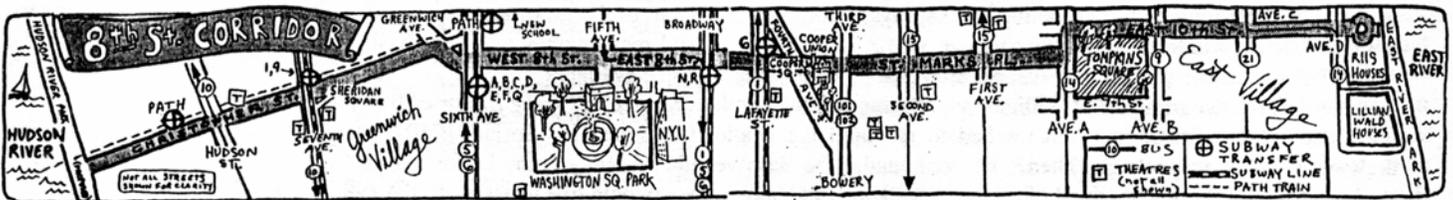
MAKING TRACKS

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Map Illustration - Wayne Fields

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The Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition (VCTC) has been organized by a group of neighborhood residents to develop plans and community support for a river-to-river light-rail trolley line linking the East Village, West Village and Greenwich Village.



VCTC

Village Crosstown Trolley Coalition

Making tracks through the Village

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